

1-1-1990

Editor's Notes

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Recommended Citation

Love, Mark and Smith, Dean (1990) "Editor's Notes," *Leaven*: Vol. 1: Iss. 4, Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol1/iss4/2>

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dean Smith

Anyone who grew up in the Church of Christ during the 1950's and 60's will recall our proud boast that we were the fastest growing churches in America. Now, some thirty or forty years later, no one among us would make that claim. In fact, there is a sort of quiet panic setting among us. Not only do we sense that we are no longer growing, but are numbers are actually declining. This is very distressing for those of us accustomed to the revival meetings and evangelistic campaigns of the past that produced many new Christians and swelled our ranks. Today the effectiveness and enthusiasm for such efforts is almost negligible. The average church, though concerned about its declining numbers, seems confused about why this is happening and almost powerless to do anything about it.

"What happened to our fervor and commitment to evangelism?" we ask, "Why are we no longer reaching people the way we used to?" Perhaps Rubel Shelly is correct when he observes that the reasons for our growth in the past were largely sociological, having more to do with the movement of people, both demographically and philosophically, to churches rather than our deliberate movement into society. Perhaps we were so successful in bringing people to Christ because it was a time when the idea of religion and our particular way of presenting was very attractive. Even so, that is no longer the case. How then do we rekindle the commitment to proclaiming the gospel to those who have never obeyed its call? That is the intent of this issue of Leaven.

We have attempted to approach this issue from several different angles and ask several difference questions. What is the gospel and how do we know when we are faithfully proclaiming it? How should we proclaim the gospel? Is it a matter of public fact or private faith? Is every Christian involved in its proclamation and in what way? What is the relationship between what we believe and the motivation to share it? How does the call to evangelize affect our assemblies and our worship together?

In addition to addressing specific issues we have also attempted to offer some practical examples and resources in an effort to encourage action as well as reflection. We offer our readers suggestions of resources for preaching and teaching; of literature, both classic and contemporary, to reflect upon; of examples from evangelists from all over the country of various approaches to an evangelistic Bible study; and the stories of conversion from among our readers to inspire us to greater commitment and service. We also offer the reflections of three leaders among us who are wrestling with the implications of our changing scene and attempting to offer imaginative and faithful responses. It is our fervent hope that this issue may be a valuable contribution to this discussion and will motivate our readers to action as well.